



ARTICLE

Preventing Anti-Semitism and Other Forms of Barbarism in the Present and in the Future through Art: Using the Example of the Play “The Investigation. Oratorio in 11 Songs” by Peter Weiss

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ABSTRACT

75 years have passed since the liberation of Auschwitz, but racism, nationalism and xenophobia (including anti-Semitism) are still widespread; in fact, due to an increasingly solipsistic policy of international leaders, hostility against those who don't match race, religion, culture or sexual orientation is even experiencing a renaissance. Fake news start to replace facts. In Germany, politicians of the (democratically elected) right-wing party AfD [*Alternative for Germany*] publicly question the significance of the Holocaust. According to the polls, around 33% of European youths have little or no knowledge about the attempted annihilation of Jews during World War II. In order to prevent the return of barbarism it is essential to remember and understand the characteristics that actually led to barbarism in the first place. Peter Weiss' play *Die Ermittlung: Oratorium in 11 Gesängen* [The Investigation. Oratorio in 11 Songs] written in 1965, takes a very thorough look at what Auschwitz was, how it had been made possible and how it survived in society even after the war. The following article examines the play and its context in literature and films on the Holocaust, paying particular attention to the possibility of explaining the, as Elie Wiesel has put it, “unexplainable” and converting it into a teaching experience for current generations.

KEYWORDS

Auschwitz, Holocaust, Remembrance, Education, Alternative for Germany, populism, xenophobia

Received 29 March 2020

Accepted 4 August 2020

Published online 9 July 2021

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A (Rather Personal) Introduction

Last year I met with some old friends in Berlin. Thinking of how to spend our time reasonably, someone suggested to visit the former Nazi concentration camp *KZ Sachsenhausen*, which, since 1993, serves as a public remembrance site under the name *Sachsenhausen Memorial and Museum*. The idea was spontaneous and somehow peculiar, since all of us went to school in Germany in the seventies, where, in history class, “The Holocaust” was a recurrent (some jesters then even claimed: the only) subject being taught. Hence, none of us felt a particular need for further “education” as to the nature of the Nazi terror and its implications.

We went anyway and, as expected, I found my suspicion confirmed. Though the entire site is lovingly designed with the required professionalism and thoughtfulness, featuring a large number of permanent and travelling exhibitions, paying elaborate attention to detail—still there was nothing, virtually nothing new to me. The structure of power within the SS; the hard-to-bear descriptions of all sorts of atrocities; the individual stories of the ones who have been killed (and of the very few who were lucky to escape)—I had heard and seen them countless times before.

Nevertheless, the visit wasn’t in vain; on the contrary, while the head remained calm, the heart vehemently reacted. Standing right in the place, where “it” had happened, resulted in an emotional chill I was completely unable to shake off. The horror of the events became palpable, at least to some extent. I’m not prepared to enter the discussion if there is an *energy of a place*—a theory which is very popular within the New Age movement and is usually rejected or even ridiculed by natural sciences. I would rather call it “the power of a live experience”. And I have seen it many times myself, especially in former concentration camps that I have visited: *Dachau*, *Buchenwald* and now *Sachsenhausen*. I have even experienced it even with visitors, mainly school classes that are habitually being brought out to these sites. When, under normal circumstances, there is constant chatter and merrymaking, here even the most hardboiled class hooligans keep silent, obviously taken aback by the intrinsic atmosphere this place exudes.

The Current Situation

During the celebrations to the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz in January 2020, politicians from all sides have again solemnly invoked the responsibility that Auschwitz *shall never happen again*. They do this actually every year, but with regards to how the world is changing right now their appeal is probably not unfounded. Currently, we are facing two fundamental problems in this respect: the first one lies within the rise of populism that enables politicians to offer simple answers to complex problems by dividing the world into “us” and “them”—them being preponderantly migrants, political dissidents or Jews who serve as real scapegoats for actually not real crises. It is striking in how many European parliament’s right-wing parties have a seat right now (Ehmsen & Scharenberg, 2018). Besides raising hatred against migrants or, quite general, “foreigners”, many of these parties—for example, Jobbik and Fidesz in

Hungary (Ehmsen & Scharenberg, 2018, p. 4), the PiS in Poland (Cienski, 2020) or the FPÖ in Austria (Goldenberg, 2018)—share an anti-Semitic worldview, too, oftentimes entertaining the notion that there is a worldwide *conspiracy* going on, usually involving George Soros or other major players of Jewish descent who supposedly desire the downfall of the West by infiltrating it with foreigners, conducting a “Great Replacement” in order to weaken and finally topple Western cultures (Bergmann, 2018).

Consequently, in the last years—since the infamous Utøya massacre, carried out by Anders Breivik in 2011—more and more individuals, seemingly fueled by the rhetoric of these parties and the cheering of like-minded supporters on some websites, or in the echo chambers of their closed Facebook¹ and WhatsApp² groups have decided to take matters into their own hands: the car attack in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017; the Las Vegas shooting in 2017; the Christchurch mosque shooting in New Zealand and the El Paso shooting, both in 2019, just to name the most prominent ones. All perpetrators were far-right white men who acted on the same ideology of racism and self-proclaimed supremacy of the white race as once the Nazis did.

In Germany, as said above, a party called AfD [Alternative for Germany] is growing in more and more numbers (“Germany’s AfD”, 2020). One of their chairmen, Alexander Gauland, thinks the Germans are not acknowledging enough “the achievements of our soldiers during World War II” (as cited in Storbeck, 2017), and another leading figure, Björn Höcke, states that in the future the use of “a policy of well-tempered cruelty” (Höcke, 2018, p. 254; my translation from German—O. K.) for Germany will be unavoidable: “The responsibility will then lie with those who with their pathetic actions have made these measures necessary” (Höcke, 2018, p. 254; my translation from German—O. K.). Höcke has actually taken the boldness of his fantasies to such an extent that since September 2019 it is not only legal to call him a “fascist” (Hänel, 2020) but a part of his party (the so-called “Wing”) has been in March 2020 officially declared “extremist” by the *Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution*, which is “the first time in Germany’s postwar history that a party represented in the federal Parliament has elicited such intense scrutiny” (Bennhold, 2020).

This party consciously tests the boundaries of what can be said out loud every day; it revels in permanent provocation, occasionally paddles back when the outcry is a little too loud, only to stylize itself afterwards as the victim of misunderstanding and over-exaggerated political correctness (McGuinness, 2019). With this tactic, they have successfully poisoned the political landscape. And the fact that within the last 8 months from writing this article three major shooting have occurred in Germany—the murder of politician Walter Lübcke in June 2019, the synagogue shooting in Halle in October 2019 and the Hanau shooting in February 2020—all of them carried out by avowed neo-Nazis who had attended meetings of the AfD and who clearly were under the impression that they had to “defend” their country against Jews and migrants, is indeed a signal that a politician’s words and actions can encourage people to want to contribute from their side.

¹ Facebook™ is a trademark of Facebook Inc., registered in the U.S. and other countries.

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Admittedly, these terrorists are a rarity. Almost all of them were loners who, like in a cliché movie, still lived with their parents, never had a girlfriend, felt neglected and unappreciated—lost individuals who, for once in their lives, wanted to be “someone” (in this respect, by the way, they are no different from Muslim terrorists who are willing to sacrifice their life for the *Jihad*). It clearly has to be emphasized that the majority of citizens of said countries is definitely not inclined yet to murder people for a “cause”.

But—and it is the second fundamental problem—polls show an increasing approval of what right-wing politicians and their ready accomplices say and do, even to the point that “every second German (48 percent) expects the party to be involved in a state or even federal government within the next ten years” (“Nearly 50 percent of Germans...”, 2020). Returning to the phenomenon of the Holocaust and its inherent lesson—and it should be clear that “the Holocaust” is a metaphor for racism and xenophobia in general—this results in a decreasing factor of deterrent. Marc Santora fears, that “the horrific lessons of the death camp are being lost” (Santora, 2020). Aaron Breitbart, a senior researcher at the Simon Wiesenthal Center, says: “Not only are people willing to forget about the Holocaust, they’re willing to deny it” (Popescu, 2018). The list goes on and on.

It is a natural process that, with every generation, the horror of an incident becomes more and more diluted. The generation that has seen World War II (by the way, the generation of my grandparents) had sworn to themselves and to their children that something like this *must never happen again*. This (positive) attitude is being passed on to their children but evidently weakens with every additional step.

As with anti-Semitism in Europe, it is not only growing due to an “imported” Jew hatred by migrants from (primarily Arabic) countries for whom “Israel” and “Jews” are synonyms. It is also growing amongst generic German and European citizens (Großbongardt, Rapp, & Schaefer, 2019) for whom Jews—as they are much less recognizable in daily life than, say, migrants from Northern Africa—serve as a concept of culprit responsible for everything *that does not go well in my life*. Florette Cohen Abady states: “Often those who are the most antisemitic have never even encountered a Jew” (Abady, 2019, p. 273).

Subsequently, the question is what can be done about it? How is it possible to reach anti-Semites or racists in general? Or at least those who are yet undecided but susceptible to extremist thinking? Of course, there are countless initiatives worldwide with the goal to fight oblivion and to prevent the return of Nazi ideology: Holocaust museums like *Yad Vashem* in Jerusalem; the *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* in Berlin; the *Holocaust Memorial* at Auschwitz itself, only to name a very few.

Many survivors of the Holocaust have made it their lifelong task to teach the following generations, amongst them Simon Wiesenthal, Otto Frank and Elie Wiesel who, although he “stopped teaching Holocaust studies at the universities” (Potap, 2019, p. 106) after a very trying semester at Yale, anyway went on “talking about oppressors, victims, observers, and survivors relevant to the Holocaust or other forms of genocide” (Ibid.).

There are initiatives like the *Shoah Foundation*, founded by Steven Spielberg after the success of his film *Schindler’s List*, which puts its major effort on recording

testimonies of Holocaust survivors “to help silence the Holocaust deniers who’d popped up during the making of ‘Schindler’s List’” (Cohen, 2014).

And not surprisingly, a huge number of initiatives include the arts. Looking back on history, the arts have always been regarded a decisive factor in improving a human being. When analyzing the Greek tragedy and its power to purge the soul of the spectator, Aristotle famously deployed the term “catharsis”, achieving this “through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions” (Aristotle, trans. 1964, p. 296). Friedrich Schiller’s programmatic essay *Die Schaubühne als eine moralische Anstalt betrachtet* [The Theatre Considered as a Moral Institution] went even a step further: “The theatre is more than any other public institution of the state a school of practical wisdom, a guide through the daily life, an infallible key to the most secret access to the human soul” (Schiller, 1879, p. 46; my translation from German—O. K.).

Within the arts, it is probably—this claim, of course, is controversial but it is a major element of my argumentation—said *live experience* that has the most auspicious potential to reach people both on an emotional and, in an ideal scenario, on an intellectual level.

This article examines Peter Weiss’ play *Die Ermittlung: Oratorium in 11 Gesängen* [The Investigation. Oratorio in 11 Songs] as a possible example of displaying and exercising such a potential. I would like to point out that the main focus of the analysis will neither lie on a literary discussion of the play, nor on the nature of the documents, their authenticity and how Weiss has translated them into his play. I count on the reader’s knowledge that *Die Ermittlung* [The Investigation] is based on Weiss’ *Frankfurter Auszüge* [Frankfurt Excerpts] (Weiss, 1965, pp. 152–188), which in turn are based on Bernd Naumann’s reports (Naumann, 1965) and Hermann Langbein’s protocols (Langbein, 1995) of the Auschwitz trial in Frankfurt am Main between 1963 and 1965, both published in 1965 in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (as cited in Kaiser, 2013). I furthermore do not plan to conduct a general discussion on the dangers and possibilities of manipulating historical facts in theatre, since no one ever accused Weiss of deliberately falsifying history. The analysis will rather focus on two central questions: the first part will take a look at the text itself in its formal construction and its corresponding ideological intention; in the second part, the question of why this very play might serve as a means of fighting increasing ignorance and separation will be looked upon. In other words, it should be examined which intentions Peter Weiss himself tries to pursue with his play; which parts of the phenomenon “Holocaust” he captures and which techniques he uses in doing so; which comparable plays, books, films, operas there are, and why Peter Weiss’ play actually occupies a special position amongst them, without any judgment of quality.

The Play

In order to demonstrate what *The Investigation* is, it would be advisable to break down first what it is not. It is not a report of the Frankfurt Trial, as Bernd Naumann and Hermann Langbein have presented it, without no further intention than to dryly document it. As Weiss himself writes in the foreword to *The Investigation*, the intention

is “not to attempt to reconstruct the court before which the proceedings of the camp trial took place” (Weiss, 1966, p. 1)³.

Nor is the play, in contrast to the natural task of the trial, the attempt to define guilt, on a legal or rather moral level. Weiss explains in the preface that the “bearers of these names” (he speaks about the defendants) should not be accused once again in this drama (Ibid.), probably because any doubt of their “guilt” would be absurd. Incidentally, this is also supported by the fact that *The Investigation* was already completed before the actual closing of the trial (Haiduk, 1977, p. 132). Thirdly, the play is not at all an attempt to visualize the reality of Auschwitz, since, to quote the preface once again; it is “impossible trying to present the camp itself on the stage” (Weiss, 1966, p. 1).

Peter Weiss’ intention is a different one: Firstly, he aims at a (basically factual) analysis of what happened in Auschwitz, or, as Erika Salloch puts it, “*The Investigation* shows the functioning of a concentration camp” (Salloch, 1972, p. 43; my translation from German—O. K.). Weiss’ claim in this respect is as comprehensive as possible, taking into consideration a large number of different factors: the meticulously planned and carefully organized mass extinction of people; the logistic procedures without which Auschwitz would not have been able to operate as a killing factory; the description of various perpetrator types represented in the camp; and the perspective of the victims who were subjected to all kinds of repression, torture and murder.

Weiss’ second goal is the following: when he takes up historical topics, he is interested above all in their relation to the present (as cited in Schumacher, 1965b, p. 4). Weiss’ standpoint is a decidedly Marxist one, as he himself had unmistakably stated in his *10 Arbeitspunkte eines Autors in der geteilten Welt* [10 working points of an author in a divided world] (Weiss, 1971, pp. 14–24). His theatre is to be understood as a socio-critical and politically engaged art form that attempts to directly influence social developments. His technique hereby is the one of *The Documentary Theatre*.

There is neither the space (nor the need) to extensively discuss *The Documentary Theatre*, which actually emerged from Bertolt Brecht’s *Political Theatre* in the twenties in Germany, and was at its height in the sixties with Peter Weiss as one of its most prominent representatives. As Weiss himself had pointed out in his programmatic *14 Notizen zum dokumentarischen Theater* [14 notes on the documentary theatre], the most important characteristics are that the authors in their works point to existing social and political actualities, disclose them, and present them as pure facts for discussion and critical reflection: “The documentary theatre presents facts for evaluation. It presents various ways to perceive events and statements. It presents the motives for that perception” (Weiss, 1968b, p. 34; my translation from German—O. K.). They capture reality, which they understand as changeable in so-called “models” (Weiss, 1968b, p. 33) in order to achieve universal validity. They reflect political current events, aspire to uncover any form of government-induced conspiracy in order to expose them and its corresponding organs. *The Documentary Theatre* therefore is a theatre

³ In this paper, all quotations from the play *Die Ermittlung* [The Investigation] (including the foreword) have been taken from the English translation by Jon Swan and Ulu Grosbard (Weiss, 1966).

For some reason—which we will not discuss here—parts of the dialogue of the original German version have been omitted in the English translation. Hence, I will quote them directly from the Suhrkamp edition (Weiss, 1976a), translating them myself – O. K.

of public protest that lays its finger into the wounds of society in order to stimulate a process of critical thinking, which might finally lead to political action (Zipes, 1967).

Consequently, *The Investigation* offers permanent cross-references from the past to the present, for example in comments and remarks of the defendants that prove that fascist and racist ideas are still virulent even twenty years after the downfall of the *Third Reich*. Yes, its ideology might possibly even roar up again, as suggests the closing statement of Mulka at the end of the play, followed by “loud approbation from the accused” (Weiss, 1966, p. 270). Likewise, the last sentence in Weiss’ *Meine Ortschaft* [My place], a text with a similar topic that he wrote prior to *The Investigation*: “It is not over yet” (Weiss, 1968a, p. 124; my translation from German—O. K.); or the concluding words of his play *Marat/Sade*, a story that thematically, too, plays in the past but can be understood as a model for the present: “When will you finally learn to see / When will you finally understand” (Weiss, 1976b, p. 255; my translation from German—O. K.).

The cross-references also show that former Nazi figures still (or again) hold honorable and well-paid positions in post-war German society, proving that the necessary process of *denazification* is in constant danger and far from being completed: “They live undisturbed / They hold high offices / They increase their possessions / And continue to work in those factories / In which the prisoners of that time / Were wasted” (Weiss, 1976a, p. 445; my translation from German—O. K.). Finally, *The Investigation* casts light on leading corporations and companies that were then involved in the killing of millions of people, and that have been re-established in present Germany, having “ended up today in magnificent condition / and that they are now in the midst of/as they say/a new phase of expansion” (Weiss, 1966, p. 131).

This way Weiss strives to reveal the typical patterns of the past in order to validly transfer them to the present. His method is that of discursively arranging the very facts that he has derived from Naumann’s and Langbein’s trial reports and from his own fact compilation, the *Frankfurter Auszüge* [Frankfurt Excerpts]. In this respect, he tries to avoid any form of individualization, in order to create a distance that still allows critical, intellectual weighing; include as many perspectives to the story as possible—Weiss himself speaks of a “condensation” of facts (Weiss, 1966, p. 1)—while at the same time keeping their authenticity intact.

Indeed, his play is not based on the biography of just one character, and it doesn’t even bother with culture or race—the expression “Jew”, for example, does not appear even once throughout the entire drama. Consequently, there is no actual *hero*, either, unlike, for example, in Friedrich Schiller’s classical historical dramas (*William Tell*, *Don Carlos*, *Wallenstein* and many more), or—to come back to typical representatives of *The Documentary Theatre* in Germany in the sixties—in the works of Rolf Hochhuth (Father Ricardo in *Der Stellvertreter. Ein christliches Trauerspiel* [The Deputy, a Christian Tragedy] (Hochhuth, 1963) and Heinar Kipphardt (J. Robert Oppenheimer in *In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer*) (Kipphardt, 1964) or Joel Brand in *Joel Brand* (Kipphardt, 1988). Peter Weiss’ heroes (in this case the “witnesses”) are deprived of their names, their stories are no longer their own. They are a *condensation* of those suffered by many hundreds of thousands of fellow victims. The technique is clear: to keep the reader (and/or: the spectator) in a distance, similar to Bertolt Brecht’s

“distancing effect” (Brecht, 1957), from which he does not pity, consumed by his emotions, but recognizes human and social patterns and transfers them to his present time. The fact that no solutions are being offered during the process is consequent and immanent to the method.

This way, Peter Weiss differs fundamentally from many other authors of the Holocaust literature who have opposed Theodor W. Adorno’s verdict “to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric” (Adorno, 1977, p. 30; my translation from German—O. K.) which, of course, was honorable, however even Adorno himself could not maintain it during his own lifetime. In view of the fact that Weiss had not been at the concentration camp himself, even though his name was “on the list of those who were to be transferred there for good” (Weiss, 1968a, p. 114), his literature is decidedly not a *personal* one, like, for instance, the poems of Nobel prize winner Nelly Sachs, especially the collection *In den Wohnungen des Todes* [In the Habitations of Death] (Sachs, 1947); the memoirs of Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo* [If this is a Man] (Levi, 1947); the work of Giorgio Bassani, for example, his novel *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* [The Gardens of the Finzi-Contini] (Bassani, 1963); or, of course, the poems of Paul Celan, amongst them the most famous *Todesfuge* [Fugue of Death] (Celan, 1952). All these authors—and this is just a very sketchy collection—wrote mainly in order to somehow deal with their own traumatic experiences during the Nazi time.

Neither is it Weiss’ intention to just historically record the Nazi crimes and save them for later generations, nor does he, as we have seen, pursue a plan to recreate the reality of Auschwitz (or other infamous camps) on stage, as, for instances, Rolf Hochhuth has done it in *Der Stellvertreter* [The Deputy] (1963) and, evidently, countless Hollywood films have tried it, too, the most known amongst them *Schindler’s List* (1992), *La Vita è bella* (1997), *The Pianist* (2002), *Defiance* (2008), *Son of Saul* (2015).

Weiss’ goal is the factual report of what actually happened, presenting the spectator with a picture as accurate and complete as possible. The phenomenon of Auschwitz as a whole shall become intelligible, setting off a process of reflection that gives way to an understanding of fascism itself (the most monstrous expression of which indeed was the Holocaust) to serve as a model for each recipient’s current life.

Striving to an Utmost Level of Comprehensiveness—the Three Hells

What makes *The Investigation* so unique in the history of art dealing with the Holocaust, is the depiction of the various, as Ernst Schumacher has called it, “hells” (Schumacher, 1965a, p. 934; my translation from German—O. K.) of Auschwitz. Those hells can be found separately in other works, but in *The Investigation*, as a matter of fact, all three hells are present at the same time: the *hell before Auschwitz*, which describes all the activities before and around the concentration camp; the *hell of Auschwitz* itself, which takes the spectator right into the heart of the *Final Solution*, capturing the closed universe of the camp in its different expressions and perspectives; and the *hell after Auschwitz*, which focuses on the repercussions.

For all three “hells”, there are numerous dramatic examples. The *hell before Auschwitz* is being featured in plays such as *Incident in Vichy* by Arthur Miller (Miller,

1965) which—within the talks of the detainees—sheds light on how the Nazis acted in order to implement their terror in Europe; said *Joel Brand* by Heinar Kipphardt, a story around the attempt to exchange Jews in a gigantic deal with Adolf Eichmann; or Max Frisch's *Andorra* (Frisch, 1961) that indelibly describes how anti-Semitism develops from humble beginnings to inhumanity.

And not to forget (though we want to focus more on dramatic works than on films) the 1982 American television film *The Wave*, based on the psychological experiment *The Third Wave* by Ron Jones in 1967 (Jones, 1981), that showed exemplary how ordinary people, in this case a high school class, can be seduced into becoming ardent fascists.

The second field, the *hell of Auschwitz*, can be detected in plays such as Hochuth's already mentioned *The Deputy* (at least in its 5th act), Hedda Zinner's *Ravensbrück Ballad* (Zinner, 1961), *Ghetto* by Yehoshua Sobol (Sobol, 1984) or—in a broader sense—in *Through Roses* by Marc Neikrug (Neikrug, 1989), a “musical drama for one actor and eight solo instruments”.

For the third field, the hell after Auschwitz, we can name theatre plays such as *Die Sperrzonen. Eine deutsche Tragödie* [Restricted Areas. A German Tragedy] by Stefan Andres (Andres, 1959) or *Der schwarze Schwan* [The Black Swan] by Martin Walser (Walser, 1964).

All three approaches pursue a specific goal, but their perspectives are limited, and the fact that, as a rule, only one area is illuminated at a time, while other parts of the Holocaust phenomenon are being neglected, lies in the nature of things and is, of course, no subject of reproach to any of the authors. However, all three approaches contain an inherent danger, which I would like to outline briefly. Works about the *hell before Auschwitz* do indeed have the potential to conduct a discourse about the premonitions and preconditions of the *Third Reich* and the *Final Solution*; something which—as has been emphasized in the introduction of this article—might be deemed considerably important in today's world in order to recognize and tackle any form of awakening barbarism. But such works usually succeed less in *shocking* the audience, since the immediate examples of the *consequences* are missing. Dieter Lamping (1992) writes (and I agree with him) that “all poetry of rank about Auschwitz is shocking—whether it is realistic or abstract. Yes, one can even say: it has rank only in so far as it shocks” (Lamping 1992, p. 279; my translation from German—O. K.). This cannot be stressed enough: the sheer phenomenon of the Holocaust is so horrendous, so beyond the realm of humanity that it cannot leave any other sentiment than shock. Thus, when a piece of work of art that deals with Auschwitz itself does not shock, it has missed its aim.

Moreover, using the first approach might force the artist to yet attach some unambiguous references to the present—or otherwise “to have to trust in the political-social ability of abstraction and concretion of their viewers” (Schumacher, 1965a, p. 934; my translation from German—O. K.), which, for example, can be seen very clearly in Heinar Kipphardt's *Bruder Eichmann* [Brother Eichmann] (Kipphardt, 1983), which attempts to fill the historical gap by inserting “analogy scenes” (p. 6; my translation from German—O. K.) of American generals discussing the neutron bomb, reports on

junta torture activities, statements by the *Baader-Meinhof Investigative Committee*, and even an interview with the then Israeli Minister of Defense, Ariel Sharon.

Works about the *hell after Auschwitz* suffer from this incompleteness, too. In *Der schwarze Schwan* [The Black Swan] (Walser, 1964) the author manages to convey a psychologically intense portrait of Rudi, the post-born child, who accidentally learns about his father's concentration camp doctor's past and is no longer able to cope with his guilt (for which he consequently shoots himself); but the actual *hell of Auschwitz* necessarily gets lost along the way. At best, it can be conjured up in the metaphor of the black swan and move the audience. However, again, it in no way does shock them.

As for the works of art that place the *hell of Auschwitz* right in the center of their story, one is first confronted with the quite understandable difficulty of depicting the horror. Here, the line between shock and incredibility, true intensity and false pathos is traditionally very thin. Especially in their finales, a number of plays succumb to the tendency to sink into "conventional theatricality" (Schumacher, 1965a, p. 932; my translation from German—O. K.). One of the most prominent examples in theatre is certainly Rolf Hochhuth's *The Deputy*. I think that no one will contradict the fact that the showdown between the diabolically oversized doctor, the opera-like death of Carlotta and Father Riccardo's heroic, though drowned in pathos struggle with himself and the world is bordering hard with the unbelievable and destroys a lot of the credit of the drama. Likewise, Hedda Zinner's *Ravensbrück Ballad* which ends in a downright mushy agony scene of the block elder Maria, the positive hero of the play, while outside the victorious tanks of the Red Army are already standing in front of the barbed-wire fences—at such points it might become difficult to take the story still seriously.

And yet another problem emerges. Even when assuming that it is actually possible to reproduce the atmosphere of the camp "authentically" (which should never be doubted *a priori*), we are nevertheless presented with a very narrow section of the Holocaust phenomenon. For characteristic and "new" are certainly not the extent of brutality and perversity of the perpetrators towards their victims—ruthless, brute violence against individuals by an oppressive regime, along with the will to annihilate an entire people, has existed practically at all times—Armenia, Rwanda, Cambodia, Indonesia, Sudan, Bosnia, etc. are just the most recent examples (Andreopoulos, 1994).

What is indeed new and up to this point still unprecedented about the Holocaust is the highly perfected, industrialized system of killing—oftentimes even without any genuine hatred, as Hannah Arendt has shown in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Arendt, 1963), describing killers who killed just because they considered it their necessary duty. This kind of cold professionalism and, as the cliché goes, typically German thoroughness, which resulted in the death of 6 million Jews, not to count all the other victims of World War II, has never before been witnessed.

Which leaves the question inasmuch a play like the *Ravensbrück Ballad* or a musical piece like *Through Roses*, which tells its story from the seemingly naive perspective of a gullible, inexperienced violinist, is able to achieve this kind of comprehensiveness. To be clear: It doesn't have to do this, either. Every author is

completely free to deal with the Holocaust the way she or he wants. No one is under the obligation to cover every aspect of the *Shoah*—which, of course, is impossible anyway. My only concern is to draw attention to the theoretical and practical advantages and disadvantages that arise from the choice of which *hell of Auschwitz* one decides to portray. And—which is the main idea of this article—to determine which approach might be the most suitable so that the piece of art develops its utmost potential to reach the recipients.

Coming back to *The Investigation*, Ernst Schumacher states (absolutely correctly, in my view) that in this drama all three “hells” are equally covered (Schumacher, 1965a, p. 937), which is already evident from the three-dimensional concept of time: *The Investigation* recounts a trial from the present in which witnesses tell of the camp’s past and the time before it. But this is only one basis of Weiss’ discursive method. By depicting a truly extensive number of defendants and witnesses, each in his or her very own way of speaking and behaving, Weiss succeeds in drawing an immensely complex picture of the fascist apparatus and its executors, their activities, their ideological preconditions and their morals. There is the sadistic torturer Boger who enjoyed tormenting and killing beyond his mission; the smug Kaduk who cannot understand why he of all people was arrested (Weiss, 1966, p. 54); the always friendly doctors Dr. Vetter, Dr. Schatz, Dr. Capesius, “well-bred” (Weiss, 1966, p. 91) men, who did not kill out of hate but “because they had to” (Weiss, 1966, p. 91); the accused Hofmann who affirms “I personally didn’t have anything / against those people / There were some like them at home too / Before they were taken away / I always used to tell my family / You go right on buying from them / After all they are humans too” (Weiss, 1966, p. 18); the medical employee Klehr who loved the “round numbers” (Weiss, 1966, p. 186) and who refuses to take any personal responsibility: “Mr. President / we were all in a strait jacket / We were nothing but numbers / just like the prisoners” (Weiss, 1966, p. 191); or the *Unterscharführer* Stark who held lectures on “humanism in Goethe” (Weiss, 1966, p. 136) in the camp while murdering detainees, and whose excuse is this: “It was hammered into us (...) we weren’t supposed to think for ourselves” (Weiss, 1966, p. 156/157); or the camp doctor Flage who showed that “it would have been possible / to influence the course of the camp operations” (Weiss, 1966, p. 103).

This is only a tiny part of the perpetrators before the and in the *hell of Auschwitz* that are being presented and exposed. The play features a vast number of very different types of fascist personalities, conveying a solid image of how diverse—and in their thoroughness to destroy—how even the German Nazi society actually was.

With regards to the *hell after Auschwitz*, Weiss detects certain stereotypes, both in the terminology and a certain behavior of justifying themselves, which can be noticed in almost all of the accused and which implies a clear warning to the present day. This begins with the use of language, which has a clear method of linguistic diminishing: words like “only”, “never”, “not one time” or phrases like “I had to...” as well as sentences like “I don’t know”, “I don’t know anything about that”, etc. run through almost all statements. This is similar to looking back at their crimes: hardly anyone is aware of their guilt, let alone acknowledge it. The views vary between that they still

consider themselves “innocent even today” (Weiss, 1966, p. 198), to the adamant request to finally be left in peace, after all in the past years one has demonstrated what a good person one has been, for example the defendant Kaduk (Weiss, 1966, p. 55). Many refer to having only received “orders” (e.g., Weiss, 1966, p. 177), or to having been corrupted and forced by the system, as one of them states: “I was against the whole thing / I myself was / persecuted by the system” (Weiss, 1966, p. 269). The play ends with the cynical demand to be acquitted of all crimes because “our nation has worked its way up / after a devastating war / to a leading position in the world / we ought to concern ourselves / with other things / than blame and reproaches / that should be thought of/as long since atoned for” (Weiss, 1966, p. 270).

As for the *hell of Auschwitz* (which is primarily depicted in the victims), it should be mentioned first that Weiss’ method is more linear here. Since it is no longer a question of individuals, but of the fate of millions of people—that’s why the witnesses lose their names, become “mere speaking tubes” (Weiss, 1966, p. 1)—the author has the opportunity to tell the story in different thematic stages. The content of the 11 songs (from which, by the way, the two middle songs by Lili Tofler and Unterscharführer Stark must be subtracted as contrapuntally contrasting individual songs) is constructed in a narrowing of perspective, because it describes the path of the victims from the ramp (1st song) to the life in the camp and finally to the ovens (11th song).

What happens along this way and is recorded in the reports of the witnesses, I would like to describe only in its most important parts due to the enormous amount of information. It describes the various types of interaction with the executioners, the methods of torture and repression; the various sections of the camp, that is: the life in the barracks, the work conditions, the medical experiments; the logistic and bureaucratic procedures; the behavior and degree of suffering from the part of the victims; the possibility or impossibility of resistance; the extent of extermination based on statistical figures. Weiss thus succeeds not only in “conveying an astonishingly rounded impression of the course of the trial on some 200 pages, but also in giving a very clear picture of the *hell of Auschwitz*. A comparison with the extensive documentation by Langbein (1027 pages) and Naumann (552 pages) gives the impression that there is hardly any important fact or context that Weiss did not include in his oratorio” (Haiduk, 1977, p. 142; my translation from German—O. K.).

The third important complex of topics, that of the social-industrial survival of fascist activities, is interspersed by Weiss in many places in a flashlight-like manner, such as the numerous references that former Nazi criminals today once again hold respectable positions, for example as “superintendent / of the government railroads” (Weiss, 1966, p. 8) or as “the director / of a large business concern” (Weiss, 1966, p. 168), just to name two examples out of many more. And as far as the entanglement of industry in the organizational process of the concentration camps is concerned, which for the Marxist Weiss is particularly important, company names are mentioned explicitly several times, e.g., the IG-Farben, Krupp or Siemens (Weiss, 1966, p. 6); their continued existence after the war (“The manufacturers of these furnaces / The Topf und Söhne company / As it says in its patent specification / After the war / Improved

their facilities / On the basis of experience gained”) (Weiss 1976a, p. 439; my translation from German—O. K.); to the fact that these companies hugely profited from the cheap labor in the camps—even worse, the camps could not have even existed without the support of the industry.

Conclusion: “The Investigation” as a Teaching Experience

It is precisely this approach: to draw a picture of the Holocaust and its implicit regularities as comprehensively as possible, which (in my opinion) makes *The Investigation* a most appropriate and effective piece of art to reach and teach today’s generation. According to Martin Esslin, the text displays “such objectivity that it can provide the basis for a fully effective artistic experience” (Esslin, 1965; my translation from German—O. K.), or, to use the words of legendary theatre director Peter Brook, it has the chance to become a “total theatre” (Brook, 1968, p. 168). Because of the fact, that *The Investigation*, unlike a book or a movie, is a *live experience*—here I’m coming back to my initial story of my visit to the concentration camp *Sachsenhausen*—its effect might even be stronger.

Hence, this article is also a plea to make this play more accessible to the public again: in the form of theatre performances, mandatory school tours, public events of any kind. Because it is shocking, but at the same time offers a great amount of information to also intellectually grasp the full magnitude of the Holocaust. It comprehensibly demonstrates how fascism emerges, but also gives a very vivid—to use the key word again, “shocking”—impression of its devastating consequences. It does not get lost in individual stories, which would make it easy for the recipient to view the protagonist’s fate merely as an isolated event, detached from his own reality, but instead presents him with a model to detect the inner mechanism of fascism and its epidemic character. And, by the way, it rids the recipient of the opportunity to act like many Germans after the war did who—involuntarily paying tribute to the beautiful *bon mot* from the Hollywood movie *American Beauty*, where Ricky establishes: “Never underestimate the power of denial”—claimed before themselves and before the world that *We really had no idea of what was going on*. For *The Investigation* exhibits too clearly the ever-same patterns how healthy patriotism degenerates into nationalism and finally into barbarism.

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